

Localising culture: the growth in the regional gallery sector and its impact on government support

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Abstract The regional art gallery sector in Australia has grown significantly in the past two decades, with many local councils investing heavily in the building of new regional galleries or expanding existing ones. Whilst there is no national cultural policy in Australia, the local government sector has embraced cultural planning to a high degree. The external mechanisms that have influenced local government to place so much importance on cultural planning infrastructure, seem to have left councils in a position where they are now supporting infrastructure that they cannot fully fund. To compound this, the growth in the regional gallery sector is not matched by corresponding growth in funding available at a State and national level, thereby creating an unhealthy competition for finite financial support. This paper examines the issues that have led to this point and asks how the sector may try reinventing itself to become more sustainable.

Biography

Brett Adlington has worked in the regional gallery sector for the past 11 years, including 6 years as curator at Gold Coast City Art Gallery. Currently he is based in Newcastle where he continues to work as a curator at Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery.

Introduction

For the past thirty years there has been substantial growth in the number of regional art galleries throughout the country (Myer 2002). Demographic changes illustrate part of this, as Queensland has been the State with correspondingly sharp increases in population and regional galleries since the early 1990s (Courier Mail 2008; Myer 2002). Alongside the building of new galleries, is the extensive redevelopment of existing galleries that have outgrown their original building and their exhibiting and collecting capacities (Museums and Galleries NSW 2007; Maitland City Council 2008; Tweed Shire Council 2008; Western Plains Cultural Centre 2008; Gladstone Regional Art Gallery & Museum 2008).

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The burgeoning sector has also created a widespread sense of professional support for regional artists and has furthered the growth in collections of artworks for the benefit of regional communities. Yet has this positive growth been met with an equally increasing pool of government funding? This paper will examine why local government has supported regional galleries so wholeheartedly through the implementation of cultural planning policy; what some of the political imperatives have been to encourage it; and what might the ramifications be, in an economic sense, to support the sector into the future.

The present picture

Regional art galleries in Australia have long been seen as an important part of local communities (Museums Australia 2002; Museums & Galleries NSW 2008a; Kingma 2001; Jordan 2008). Due to its gold wealth, Victoria saw the initial growth in regional galleries in Australia, with the establishment of galleries in Ballarat (1887), Warrnambool (1886) and Bendigo (1886) (Jordan 2008). These galleries were opened soon after the major State galleries, with the National Gallery of Victoria, Australia's first public art gallery, opening in 1861 (NGV 2008) and the Art Gallery of NSW opening in 1879 (AGNSW 2008). The aforementioned Victorian regional galleries, like their modern-day counterparts throughout the country, were initiated and fought for by dedicated local people and local politicians who viewed the support of culture as distinguishing their communities above others (Jordan 2008).

FIGURE 1 THE DEVELOPMENT OF REGIONAL GALLERIES – 1975-200

State / Territory	1975	1989	2000
Victoria	16	16	22
Queensland	4	10	31
Tasmania	2	2	2
New South Wales	18	22	29
Western Australia	3	5	8
Northern Territory	0	1	1
ACT	0	1	2
South Australia	1	2	9
TOTAL	44	59	104

Source: Myer, R 2002, *Report of the Contemporary Visual Arts and Craft Inquiry*, p. 211

Figure 1 illustrates the growth in regional galleries in Australia from 1975 to 2000 on a state by state basis. Grega (2006, p. 25) goes back further to say that in the 1950s there were only eight regional galleries in the whole country, predominantly in Victoria. Since these figures were initially published, there has been further growth in the number of regional galleries built throughout the country. The representative body for regional galleries in Queensland, Museum and Gallery Services, currently lists forty council operated art galleries on their website (Museum and Gallery Services Qld 2008) whilst Museums and Galleries NSW list thirty-four regional art galleries (Museums and Galleries NSW 2008b). Some recent examples include the 2005 opening of Hawkesbury Regional Gallery (Hawkesbury City Council 2005) and Artspace Mackay, opening in 2003 (Artspace Mackay 2008). Blue Mountains City Council is currently in the process of developing the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre, to include the Blue Mountains City Art Gallery (Blue Mountains Cultural Centre 2008).

As well as construction of new galleries, there have been significant building projects to extend or rebuild existing galleries such as Tweed River Regional Art Gallery, Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery, Dubbo Regional Gallery, Maitland Regional Art Gallery, Gladstone Regional Gallery and Museum, and Port Macquarie Hastings Regional Gallery (Museums and Galleries NSW 2007; Tweed Shire Council 2008; Lake Macquarie City Council 2008; Western Plains Cultural Centre 2008; Maitland City Council 2008; Gladstone Regional Art Gallery & Museum 2008; Port Macquarie Hastings City Council 2008). Others, such as Newcastle Region Art Gallery and Lismore Regional Gallery are currently looking towards rebuilding in the near future (Ramsey 2008; Lismore Regional Gallery 2008). Interestingly, the growth in the sector since the 1970s came at the same time as councils throughout Australia were reduced from 900 to 600 through amalgamation (Prasser 2007).

What this illustrates is that local government see art galleries as important to foster and cement community well-being (Kay 2000) and facilitate broader strategies to regenerate communities (Gray 2002). The changing dynamics of communities are also playing an important role. The greatest source of new arrivals in Queensland has been interstate migration (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). These new arrivals in regional centres, sometimes viewed as sea change destinations, often bring with them an expectation of greater infrastructure (Prasser 2007; Dunn, 2005; Gurran, Squires & Blakely 2006). McCalman (2001) also identifies that higher real incomes and changing consumption fosters a higher demand for cultural infrastructure.

The growth in building projects also illustrates the preference for all levels of government to develop infrastructure over ephemeral art projects (Craik, McAlister & Davis 2003). But we have to ask, once the infrastructure has been built, where will the money come from to fully support these larger entities?

Regional communities and culture

The evolution of the extensive importance that regional communities currently place on culture can be traced back to the 1970s with the emergence of greater policy focus on community arts and less on flagship city-based companies (Craik 2007). This engaged communities and facilitated the need for greater cultural infrastructure on a regional level. However, the more recent push for the development of cultural infrastructure in regional communities can be aligned with two key social and political factors – the external push for local government cultural plans and the economisation of the arts in general.

Of all levels of government, cultural planning is most widespread and effective at the local level. No doubt this is due to the efforts by the Australia Council and State governments to shift funding responsibilities from federal and State levels to the local level (Anderson 1992; Stevenson 2000; Bott 2006). It is also an international phenomenon however, with the United Kingdom recently going down a similar path (Gray 2002). Stevenson claims that cultural policy was 'sold' to Australian governments by international cultural planners, with the result being that by 2004 all NSW local governments were required to have a cultural plan (Stevenson, 2005). Whilst this didn't turn out to be the case, by May 2007, many had; sixty-two local councils adopted a cultural plan, forty developed one, and fifty did not have one, or had no intention of developing one (LGSA 2007). Craik, McAlister and Davis (2003) also argue that governments have been focussing on a 'bottom-up' approach to cultural policy; extending the new paradigm that sees culture "underpinning the core of contemporary societies" (Craik, McAlister & Davis 2003).

The biannual Cultural Accords, which are signed between the NSW State government and the Local Government and Shires Associations (LGSA) of NSW, align the strategic plans of the NSW Ministry for the Arts and LGSA (LGSA 2006b). It posits that local government is integral to the support of local culture and that "local government has primary responsibility for the planning, development and operation of cultural facilities at the local level" (LGSA 2006b). In signing the Cultural Accord 3, president of the Local Government Association of NSW, Cr Genia McCaffrey, stated that "Local government leadership and commitment has played a vital role in the ongoing growth of the cultural sector" (LGSA 2006a).

Madden (2001) states that most of the research concerning the economic impact of the arts has occurred at the local level. Throughout the late 1970s and into the 1990s, the Australia Council, who was strongly encouraging local government to implement cultural policies (Anderson 1992; Stevenson 2000; Bott 2006), also released numerous reports on the economic impact of the arts (Gibson 1999). As a result, most of the cultural plans developed by local government incorporated these statistics (Stevenson 2005). Representative bodies continue to provide these tools for arts advocates to arm themselves with effective tools to lobby local government (Madden 2001). It seems logical to assume that the positioning of the sector within an industry model has led to a more serious appreciation by local government of the economic impact that culture makes on local communities. The flow-on is that local government takes up these positive economic statistics to defend itself when confronting the 'drains before drama' factions of the community (Murray 1998; The Newcastle Herald 1999). Lismore Regional Gallery explicitly states the economic advantages for the community when talking of the redevelopment of the art gallery into the Margaret Olley Arts Centre, by asserting that the economic value of the creative industries in the Northern Rivers region is calculated at \$190 million (Lismore Regional Gallery 2008).

Madden (2001) is unequivocal in his caution of utilising the economic argument for cultural provision, stating that, "Economic impact studies provide no argument for government funding" (Madden 2001). The great danger he sees is that diverse industries, both within and outside the arts, get judged by one criteria – money. Others also see the danger in aligning the arts within an economic framework, resulting in the sector being judged by the same criteria as those that receive no financial support from government. Thus, by doing so, the arts "fall into the trap of arguing on the other side's ground and terms" (Tusa 1999, p. 21). Donald Horne, chair of the Australia Council from 1985 to 1990, has articulated that the economic argument was driven by the need to foster government funding of the arts rather than an inherent belief in providing culture for the common good (Glow & Johanson 2006). In reality though, there is an expectation from all levels of government for cultural organisations, and prospective cultural organisations, to claim economic credentials when arguing their case. Viewing the impact of the gallery through an economic framework seems to be politically essential in the current climate.

In a report compiled for Arts NSW, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2007c) found that in 2004–2005, the federal government spent 1% of its total cultural funding on capital expenditure, compared to local government spending 20% of its cultural budget on infrastructure (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007c). What this seems to convey is that whilst there is strong pressure on local government from federal funding bodies, including the Australia Council, to enact cultural planning and the provision of cultural infrastructure (Anderson 1992; Stevenson 2000; Bott 2006), local councils seem too heavily focussed on the bricks and mortar, and less so on the ongoing operational costs (Guldborg 2000; The Newcastle Herald 1999).

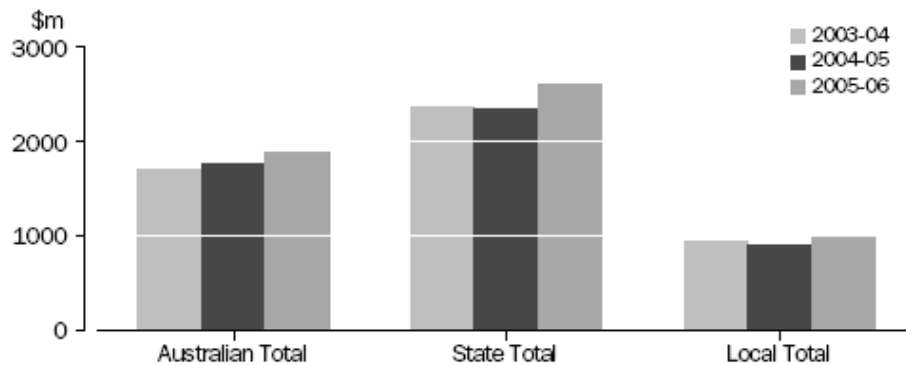
The problem is not unique to the visual arts and regional gallery sector though. Guldborg (2000) claims similar problems are evident in the performing arts sector. In the preface to Guldborg's *The arts economy 1968-1998: three decades of growth in*

Australia, Australia Council chair Margaret Seares states that growth in the arts sector over the past thirty years has come at the same time as diminishing artist incomes. Furthermore, she says that the proliferation of performing arts centres means that these venues are vulnerable to economic downturn (Guldborg, 2000). But will we allow this to happen? Throsby (2001, p. 161) raises the point that to produce new cultural capital, which are not short term investments, imposes responsibility on not only the current generation, but future generations to care for these institutions.

Analysing the data from the ABS on cultural funding by the three levels of government, a plateauing emerges on expenditure at the local government level from 2003–2006:

FIGURE 2

CULTURAL FUNDING, By level of government—2003–04 to 2005–06



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Cultural Funding by Government 2005-06*

When you consider this against the increasing number of regional galleries across the country, the sector seems to be at a critical juncture. In Queensland, the State with the greatest increase in regional galleries, levels of funding at the local level is fairly static, with insufficient planning to adapt to greater operational funding (Grega 2006). The public expectation for the newly extended gallery to expand their exhibition programs, present a wider range of public programs and further develop the collection places not only greater strain on the resources of the local authority, but also on the funding programs of State and national bodies.

Increased competition for funding is a point explicitly made in the *Report of the contemporary visual arts and craft inquiry* by Lismore Regional Art Gallery. In it they express concern at the large number of galleries in the Northern Rivers region. There are three main public galleries in the region (Lismore Regional Art Gallery, Grafton Regional Art Gallery and the expanded Tweed Regional Art Gallery). Byron Shire, Ballina Shire, Kyogle Council and the town of Nimbin (in the Lismore Shire) have completed, or are working towards, developing small galleries (Myer 2002, p. 212). The inherent problem in this was expressed thus, "Each of the venues has substantial funds outlaid in capital and all are under-served, under-funded and struggling to provide operational funding for professional staff, curatorial and educational activities and events" (Myer 2002, p. 212).

However, regional competition for funding sources, and the development of art galleries, is not necessarily a new phenomenon. The initial three Victorian regional galleries spoken about earlier were in a similar position when they were petitioning the colonial government for funds in the 1880s (Jordan 2008).

Engaging with the business community is difficult for most arts organisations, with corporate support for the sector falling in 2002 (Craik, McAlister & Davis; 2003), but in a regional context it is even harder. Many communities have limited industry with the capacity to support not only the arts, but also sporting, educational and other worthy community ventures that need to augment government support (Dunn, 2005).

Conclusion

Australia's only attempt at a national cultural policy, *Creative Nation* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994), placed culture in an elevated position with the simultaneous roles of:

leader, catalyst and cement with the capacity to enhance economic and social wealth. This elevated status produces high aspirations that face the reality test of budget rounds in which governments are keen to diminish liabilities. (Craik, McAlister & Davis 2003 citing Wanna, Joanna & Foster).

Consequently, has the economic model for enhancing the arts produced a sector that is unable to support itself? The positive economic arguments for the arts that have been claimed to help grow the sector will fail if possible counter arguments are not sought (Anderson 1992). It seems unfortunate that the good spirit in which councils entered into to create positive and creative communities could correspondingly leave them supporting organisations that they cannot finance to the extent that is warranted.

As a consequence it may lead to the sector re-examining itself, considering new ways of operating that break the traditional concept of a regional gallery. Perhaps, as Lismore Regional Gallery noted in their submission to the Myer Report, there could be truly 'regional' galleries having a wider geographical focus (Myer 2002, p. 212), with surrounding councils creating more community and educationally orientated organisations without a collection.

Not having a permanent collection might mitigate the burden on smaller surrounding galleries and would enable them to focus better on programming. Queensland could be the State to watch in this regard, as the recent local government amalgamation process, whereby the Queensland Parliament voted to reduce the number of regional councils from 156 to 72 (ABC News, 10/08/2007), has created larger councils that are now in the position of operating multiple council-run art galleries. By following the example set by library services with multiple sites, these galleries could make greater inroads to the community and could perhaps operate in a more financially sustainable manner. Other alternatives could be to look to the fluid approach taken by artist-run spaces, or public incubator and resource centres such as Octapod in Newcastle, NSW.

The challenge is growing for all levels of government to keep pace with the current growth of regional galleries and the corresponding expectation of professionalism by audiences. Maybe it is time therefore to rethink the approach that has been enacted for the previous one hundred years and look to new ways for providing for audiences into the future.

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